

The politics of forestry

John J. Berger. Forests Forever. Their ecology, restoration, and protection. The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago in association with Forests Forever Foundation and distributed by Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL, USA. 2008. xxii, 306 p., 88 p. plates (chiefly col.); 23 cm. Cloth, ISBN 13: 978-1-930066-51-9, US\$55.50; Paperback, ISBN 13: 978-1-930066-52-6, US\$33.50

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This book is a call to action—nearly a call to arms—designed to put a face on the plight of ancient forests both within the United States (US) and world-wide. In the author's words, "The purpose of this book is to explain how forests work, to discuss the fate of forests, and to suggest principles to their proper management." It accomplishes this with remarkable brevity, thoughtfully written with the general public as its intended target audience. Here the "fate of forests" is presented as tightly coupled with immense economic and political forces that emphasize short-term gain over long-term sustainability and ecosystem health. Most of the background and history of forests and their use (and misuse) are focused on the United States with emphasis on forests on its western coast. The book includes a scathing critique of the US Forest Service and its past policies, and an entire chapter is devoted to the environmental policies of the most recent Bush Administration. At a more general level, Berger overviews the global forces affecting tropical deforestation. Throughout the book, the author directs the reader toward resources and practices by which citizens can become active participants in forest conservation and restoration at local, national, and global levels. The book concludes

with a quaint but poignant introduction to the practice of planting trees.

The foreword by Charles Little is a testament to the emotional pull of the book—you cannot read of our past and present treatment of ancient forests without becoming furious. Yet the book does not simply play to our emotions—it provides a background of how forested ecosystems work and demonstrates through examples how forests may be sustainably managed through wise ecological stewardship and careful attention to the multiple services forests provide. These examples contrast sharply with the more typical business model that views tree timber and fiber as the forest's principle asset, and the multiple forces at work that promote the rapid liquidation of those assets. At times the book reads like an in-depth news article, and in fact the strength of the book lies not in its science, but rather the quality of the journalism. For example, Berger provides a harrowing account of a hostile takeover of a privately-owned redwood forest by a multinational corporation—followed by a rapid increase in harvest rate, severe environmental degradation and impacts to surrounding communities, and the fierce and highly politicized conservation battle that ensued. The inadequacies and ambivalence of regulating agencies, highlighted in this account, is a recurring theme throughout the book. Hence Berger brings the darker side of the forest industry and regulating agencies to your own backyard, and then arms the concerned citizen with the information needed to join the forest's cause.

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The landscape ecologists will find little reference to their own work within these pages. Disturbance ecology, particularly fire, is briefly discussed, but the idea of landscape design in the forest planning process is conspicuously absent. The ecology of forests is clearly biased toward Berger's own familiar system—temperate rainforests of the American Pacific Northwest. Yet this is not a scientific book—it simply provides some scientific background to inform the average citizen. So what can scientists pull from its pages? Berger provides us with insight into the politics of forestry. He presents the political, social, and economic factors that conspire to accelerate harvesting of ancient forests while simultaneously discouraging restoration of secondary forests. He illustrates the sheer enormity of the task facing conservationists who wish to stem the tide of deforestation—be it locally or worldwide. Yet the book is not all “doom and gloom”. The US Forest Service's paradigm shift toward ecosystem management, the international movement toward forest certification, and several real-life examples of true forest stewardship and restoration are cause for, as Berger puts it, “guarded optimism”.

Make no bones about it—this book clearly has an agenda, pitting the stereotypical utilitarian against the conservationist. Berger's negative opinions regarding logging on US National forests, clear cutting practices, and utilitarian concepts including the consideration of trees as a “renewable resource” and sustained yield, though well-reasoned, are also controversial. The author would do well to remember as

well that the paradigm shift to ecosystem-based management that he praises was due, in large part, to the extraordinary efforts and high quality science conducted by US Forest Service scientists, several of whom have advanced the field of landscape ecology. I was also disappointed by his cursory, almost flippant, dismissal of the “New Forestry” movement. Though Berger asserts that the book is written from a nonpartisan perspective, it is hardly possible to discuss the US politics of forestry without sliding down the slippery slope of partisanship. The book is clearly intended to mobilize an American citizenry—hence readers from other nations may be frustrated by the pervasive American history and perspective. I see these issues as short-comings not because the issues are not worth discussing, but rather because the book may not be taken as seriously as it should be.

People from all walks of life, from the accountant down the street, to a forest manager, agency scientist, and university professor, can learn something from this book. Yet I would not keep it as a dusty reference, nor do I believe you should take Berger's assertions at face value. Read it—more than once. Discuss with Berger within his own pages. Debate the issues he raises at the dinner table with your family, in the break room with your peers, and in the classroom with your students. Clearly we depend on forested ecosystems worldwide and yet their collective fate rests in our hands. Solutions are not simple, nor easy, but immensely important—so heed Berger's call and take action.